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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 180 (2015) 25 – 29

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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The 6th International Conference Edu World 2014 “Education Facing Contemporary World Issues”, 7th - 9th November 2014

## Studies and research for improving university courses

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### Abstract

In the didactics of teaching disciplines, pedagogical depth studies and research are needed more now than ever, because we have generations of students who are different from the previous ones, at least by the fact that they come to school more informed, because they have more resources available, and if they are informed, they have other demands on teachers. It also became more reluctant to the amount of knowledge they receive and they want knowledge selection after a close general criteria. They ask repeatedly the question "Why do I need this?" lesson after lesson.

These new situations with an outdated didactics does not lead to the results that we have had and we haven't anymore, especially in confrontations with students from other educational systems.

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Peer-review under responsibility of The Association “Education for tomorrow” / [Asociatia “Educatie pentru maine”].

**Keywords:** competence; university courses; didactics; communication;

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In secondary education the process of teaching and learning of disciplines can be investigated through a variety of methods, from simple observation of it to experiment as a research method. The results of the research at this level contributes to process improvement in terms of teaching. In higher education, research develops at another level, and its results underpin major decisions. Some time ago educational research were held at three levels:

- Higher level, where the operation of the educational subsystem was checked with respect to the development of the society;
- Intermediate level, where the impact of curricula and school programs in the initial training of pupils was measured
- The training level, where they studied the condition in which learning takes place and settled decisions on improving it.

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Over time it turned out that neglecting the research in solving teaching problems and determining solutions only based on scientifically unsubstantiated personal opinions led to disruption of the educational process, of the school management and of the system.

In the didactics of teaching disciplines, pedagogical depth studies and research are needed more now than ever, because we have generations of students who are different from the previous ones, at least by the fact that they come to school more informed, because they have more resources available, and if they are informed, they have other demands on teachers. It also became more reluctant to the amount of knowledge they receive and they want knowledge selection after a close general criteria. They ask repeatedly the question "Why do I need this?" lesson after lesson.

These new situations with an outdated didactics does not lead to the results that we have had and we haven't anymore, especially in confrontations with students from other educational systems.

Facing this situation, we have initiated a series of studies and research on issues of teaching, in order to improve regular university courses that are taught in our department. I worked with fellow teachers, and students, school teachers, especially those enrolled to obtain degree, who are obliged to carry out research.

We considered that the object of research is the pedagogical problem or event discovered by the person who initiates research, wishing to find new approaches to positively influence student achievement and achieve knowledge about the new approaches influence on quality.

A problem revealed is that many teachers of preschool and primary school use the exercise of building sentences for long periods in order to improve the communication skills. There are situations in which students, that reach third grade cannot develop texts because from kindergarten (the small group) to third grade answered teachers' questions. Some consider that their students know to communicate because they answer the questions correctly. At first I made a study in several kindergartens and schools to ascertain what is the extent of the phenomenon. Study results led us to begin research and find other activities that contribute to oral and written communication skills. I found that where there were some concerns, the elaboration of texts is based on models, which many students just memorize. The results were misleading because it does not lead to skills. To determine the change, we asked students and teachers to ask pupils questions and request various answers to each question. Next, students were asked to draw texts from these answers. The findings were that 82% of students have used only their sentences.

Another problem found "classroom learning", that has been with us for a long time, disappeared from the lessons. This prompted us to do a study on the use of working time by the teacher and by the pupil during the lessons. About 50 teachers and pupils left with the stopwatch in their hands and measured during several hundred lessons the time used by teachers and the time given to the 30 pupils in each class. Averages show that: at pre-school where children learn to speak, while teachers' time was 89% and children's time 11%; in primary school, teachers' time was 86% and pupils' time 14%; in secondary education teachers' time was 92% and pupils' time 8%; in higher education, teachers have retained 96% of the time.

The preparatory class is a new thing for the education. To discover the problem investigated in this class, we have witnessed over 60 lessons. I discovered, with teachers that the subject Communication in Romanian, which is a phonetic language, the phonetic analytic-synthetic method was abandoned, and they use methods specific to nonphonetic languages as the global method, which consists of reading the entire word by the pupil, aided by a proper drawing. Romanian has words with high flexural and developed word families. If a student reads the word "child" helped by the proper drawing, he cannot read: baby child, child's, children, children's etc. The same effect has the linguistic method where the teacher reads the text with the student. We realized that the student actually remembers, he does not read because we have developed another text with the same words without changing the shape and the students did not read. We found that these methods can be used later after the reading skills have been developed, having other goals: reading words, rhythm of reading etc.

Another aspect regarding the didactics of teaching Romanian literature, I found in some schools and it consists of changing some stages of literature lesson by explaining new words before reading the text, a process taken from foreign languages. We've tried this method and we've found that about 75% of the students did not understand the new words out of context, but only with them, so I showed the students that the process is not efficient. It is still used, further, in another part of the country.

Another identified problem is that many students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> forms, refused to read by themselves. By studying this, we realized that although students could read, they had no courage to read the text by themselves, but only after listening to someone else. Because we wanted to turn our pupils from listeners into readers, I researched the causes and tried to discover the ameliorative actions.

In practice teaching, the reading class began with the so-called model reading done by the teacher and continued with answers to questions regarding the text, while practicing personal reading came later. I learned from the parents that pupils read at home a new text by themselves, only after it was read aloud by an adult.

Facing this situation, we put pupils in the experimental schools, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> form, first read any new text, using whisper reading, so they could control the auditory analyzer. After a semester issue was solved. About 75% of the students were reading new texts by themselves, without having to resort to an adult.

Another study has helped us to find out that the school inspection recommended pre-school teachers not to read the texts to children directly from the book, but tell them without using volumes. We realized that children's education had a problem because preschoolers were not encouraged to approach the book at this age, to realize how good it is to know how to read and to make them want to learn to read. To correct this issue we have tried various methods in kindergartens participating in this experiment and we found the method that gave the best results. So we urged teachers to read texts from the books and before, to present books and tell their children: I will read it, because I know how to read. You'll use a book without my help, when you will learn to read. After using this method more, we found that about 69% of the children wanted to learn to read in kindergarten.

Another study conducted in kindergarten focused on the memorising activity. We turned our attention to this work since we've noticed that memorising a poem was done strophe by strophe and few children managed to retain suddenly all four verses of the strophe. In our research we aimed to find out how many words can children aged 4 to 6 years hold at once. After many attempts we concluded that about 90% of children can hold 5-7 words located in logical structure, so about a verse. The conclusion was that a poem is stored for more children if they repeat it verse by verse.

10 years old pupils' assessments has led us to check what changes must our evaluation system bring. For this we gathered 700 assessment tools in schools and different counties. We reviewed them with the students and found that:

- most of them aimed at measuring knowledge (about 80%);
- abilities were contained in items (about 10%);
- attitudes were missing;
- 60% of the items had in mind the pupils' memory;
- few items (about 10%) aimed thinking, imagination, creativity;
- some tools (about 40%) did not pursue the objectives of lessons etc.

This situation helped me realize that I needed to add to my course a chapter on assessment in my discipline, where students learned to apply the pedagogy in concrete situations in the discipline they teach.

In a questionnaire applied on about 200 teachers I asked the question: What is the cause of the poor results achieved by our pupils in national and international assessments? Most teachers have had the same response: Pupils do not learn and parents no longer help." From these responses I realized that learning is needed at home, so "learning in the classroom", that we praised a long time, disappeared. Our research has searched for solving this problem because the actual teaching process, in many cases tends to become only the process of teaching, and learning is transferred home, where should produce fixation and consolidation. For solving this, solutions were needed in order to reorganize the process itself so that learning takes place in class. For many attempts I found solutions valued by teachers as interesting and effective, but it requires teachers to give students 86% of their time in the lesson, which is not easy.

Regarding the adaptation to the requirements of the 5<sup>th</sup> form of the pupils who have completed primary school, I applied a questionnaire to about a hundred teachers who teach in secondary school. Among other questions, I also asked this: Why have you taken to teach students from class IV? Responses were divided as follows:

- 87% - To know the students and to get used to them.
- 11% - Because I was told to go.
- 2% - As students get used to me.

We were surprised to see that few of them have noticed the true purpose of the action.

Starting here, we set out to study the causes that determined the difficult adaptation of pupils to the 5th form . Researches have found that the most important of the causes is the "pupils' dependence to learning "

Observing teaching and learning in primary school, I found that so-called "nannies" specific and necessary in primary school lasts until June, at the end of the 4th form. In the 5th grade it suddenly disappears, which leaves students without the orientation that they have been used to. The shock can be found only by two examples:

- the dictations in primary school are only done by the teacher, so pupils are familiar only with his/ her style; in the 5th grade 4-5 teachers dictate them with different rhythms and styles;
- In all primary school , before solving math problems, discussions are held : What do we know in the problem? What don't we know? How can we find out ? There, go to work! In most cases, students are not allowed to put their own questions and find answers.

The research aimed to find new solutions for organizing the process that students become autonomous, at least in some areas, and not remain dependent to learning.

During the lessons we found that students need other motivations to approach learning as mere communication of operational objectives at the beginning of lessons is not efficient enough. For several attempts we found that the strongest motivations are those relating to knowledge taught in connections with real life, in other words, highlighting problem situations that can be solved using the knowledge and skills obtained .

Starting from the idea that in contemporary society, scientific discoveries bring more knowledge than 10-20 years and that many of the existing knowledge becomes obsolete, the educational system has many questions to be answered; there are two important questions in didactics: What do you teach? and How do you teach?

A long-term redesign contents would not correspond because of the fast rhythm of change. For example, graduates from 2014 did not use the computer in primary school, whereas now, students in second grade might receive tablets and have even virtual textbooks. The teaching-learning process - evaluation should reorganized in pupils' textbooks. In addition, changes are necessary in textbook and workbooks. In this regard we conducted a study of these documents and found the following:

- There are too many and too few theoretical elements of communication skills training exercises in Romanian language and literature textbooks; they are considering only primary elements, such as learning to answer questions, and less construction of necessary communication messages; communication construction elements are separated from the literary text, instead of being integrated, leading to special classes of grammar and literature classes etc.
- Maths textbooks show, for the most part, independent discipline, or in relation to other disciplines; problems do not refer to concrete life situations, they don't attract more students and they don't prepare them for life.
- The information submitted and proposed exercises in auxiliary materials suffer ; Some offer information that exceed the program, not tasks with high degree of difficulty according to the curricula.

Such studies and researches are effective because:

- new approaches of teaching-learning-assessment are discovered;
- some mindsets of teachers are changed;
- teachers and students gain confidence in the new procedures, as part of their discovery;
- research participants make followers groups, so experience is multiplied.

I also studied the causes that take to this resistance to change from some people and found that it is something that is part of the teachers' culture. Most change when the idea comes from above, from the authorities or those who control and evaluate them. I tried to influence there and I'm still trying.

However, to improve my and my colleagues' courses we used the research findings. We try to bring changes in our graduates that should influence the teams in which they work. Some have succeeded, others were overwhelmed by the culture in which the group operates.

The results of these initiatives and others developed new courses have contributed to the improvement of classes, of students' teaching practice and of the research for the obtaining degree.

We also mention that the facts put under the magnifying glass of the pedagogical study and research have not been isolated from other segments of the reading. I've integrated them, so that the student and the teacher participating in the research to perceive the lesson as a whole.

The studies and the investigation of this type have an ascertaining, a descriptive, an explanatory role in the interpretation of some aspects of didactics, instituting the causes and effects and data processing etc.